Sights and Scenes

Patrick Yee

SINGAPORE

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OF SINGAPORE

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a National Museum

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Singapore

Dear Tim and Stevens,

How are you? I'm excited to hear both of you are planning to visit me in Singapore. I can't wait to show you around! I thought I'd tell you something about Singapore and the places we're going to visit.

Sir Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore, or the Lion City, in 1819. He was an official of the British East India Company. Before Raffles established a trading post here, Singapore was only a small fishing village. But because our island is at the crossroads of the East and West, it grew into an important trading centre.

Different races make up the population of our country – the Chinese and Malays live side by side with the Indians and Eurasians. They have contributed to our wonderful food, colourful festivals and interesting buildings.

I hope you enjoy the postcards with images of my favourite places in Singapore. You can take more pictures when you get here. See you soon!

PATRICK

In 1849, the Temenggong of Johor, an important court official, donated two gold coins. So the idea was born of building a museum with interesting objects from Southeast Asia. This became Singapore's first library and museum, known as the Raffles' Library and Museum. It became known internationally for its collections of specimens of the animals of Southeast Asia. Later, the museum started to specialise in Singapore's art and history. It became the National Museum in 1969 and is now known as the Singapore History Museum. In the History Museum you can trace the history of Singapore from the 14th century, when it was still a fishing village, until the present day. The displays show many important historical events like Sir Stamford Raffles' landing in Singapore, the Japanese occupation and the declaration of independence.

The Singapore Art Museum used to house the first Catholic boys' school in Singapore, St Joseph's Institution. Three Catholic brothers were involved in its construction and development. Father Beurel from France came up with the idea, Brother Lothaire designed the building, and the Irish-American Brother Noctor expanded the school. Although it was meant for Catholics, the school was open to children from all religions. Within two years, it had attracted 200 pupils. Because of its popularity, new classrooms soon needed to be built. In the 1980s, the building became too small for the school and the classrooms too noisy because of the traffic along Bras Basah Road. The school moved out, and the building was turned into the Singapore Art Museum. Today, you can find the largest public collection of 20th-century Singaporean and Southeast Asian art here.

RAFFLES CITY

The Raffles Hotel used to be the home of a British sea captain. Then two Armenians, the Sarkies brothers, took over the building and made it into a small hotel. The hotel kept on growing and became world-famous. Some of the guests who have stayed in the "Grand Old Lady of the East" are very famous. Many stories are told about the Raffles Hotel. Some are true, but others may not be. According to one story, a tiger was once found under a billiard table in the Bar and Billiard Room! Nobody knows if this really happened. But one story about the Raffles Hotel is true. Just before the Japanese arrived at the hotel during the Second World War, the Chinese waiters took all the silverware from the dining rooms. Then they buried it in the Palm Court Garden. It was kept safely hidden until the Japanese left. Next to the Raffles Hotel is the Westin Stamford Hotel, the tallest hotel in the world.

St Andrew's Cathedral is the oldest Anglican church in Singapore. It is the second church building to stand on this site. The first church was completed in 1837. Not long after the building was finished, the spire was struck twice by lightning. The building was torn down as people feared it may collapse. Indian prisoners were brought in to build the present cathedral in the English Gothic style. They made the pillars and walls very smooth with a special Indian method, using pounded seashells, sugar and egg whites. The cathedral's bells were made by the same company that made the bell of London's famous clock tower Big Ben. During the Second World War, St Andrew's Cathedral was used as a temporary hospital. Today, the church services are still well attended. Many Anglican couples like to get married here.

Padang means "field" in Malay. Many important events in Singapore's history took place at the Padang. In 1945, a victory parade was held here following the official surrender ceremony of the Japanese forces in the City Hall. Twenty years later, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stood on the steps of City Hall to declare Singapore's independence. And on 9 August 1966, we celebrated our first National Day Parade here. Next to City Hall is the Supreme Court, which is the last colonial classical building constructed in Singapore. At the ends of the field are the Singapore Cricket Club and the Singapore Recreation Club. In colonial days, the Padang used to be a meeting place of sportsmen. Then, British ladies and gentlemen, dressed in their best clothes, liked to go for a walk and gossip with one another at the nearby Esplanade.

VICTORIA THEATER

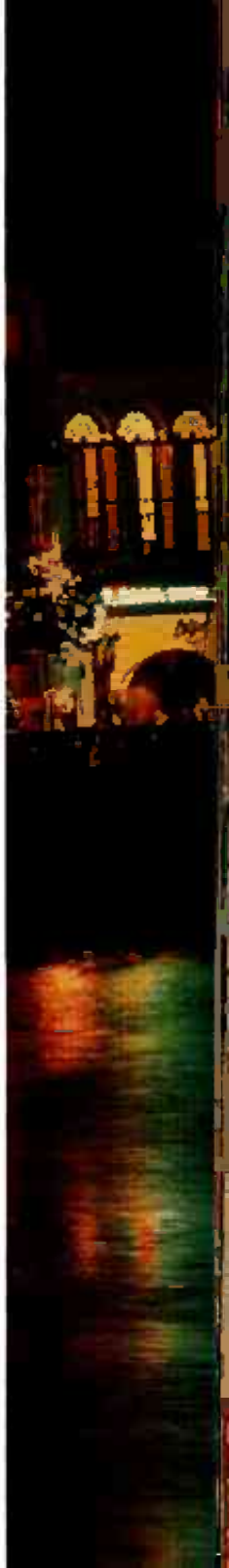
On the site of the Victoria Theatre & Concert Hall used to be Singapore's Town Hall. When Queen Victoria of Britain died in 1901, it was decided that a memorial should be built. In a public meeting, some suggestions for a memorial included a college and a large statue of the queen. The latter suggestion was turned down, and in the end, a Memorial Hall and a Clock Tower were joined to the Town Hall building. A few years later, Town Hall became Victoria Theatre. The first play that was held here was "The Pirates of Penzance". Today, the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall is home to the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. Just outside the theatre you can find the original bronze statue of the founder of Singapore, Sir Stamford Raffles. This statue used to be located at the Padang, but was shifted here during Singapore's Centenary celebrations in 1919.

Half-lion and half-fish, the Merlion is an important symbol of Singapore. It shows our origins as a fishing village and sea town. In fact, Singapore used to be called Temasek (Sea Town). The Merlion was designed by Francer Brunner and sculpted by Lim Nam Seng. The reason why the Merlion has the head of a lion is explained in a legend about how the island of Singapore was discovered. Prince Sang Nila Utama from Palembang was sailing the seas in search of a place to build a city. When he approached the sandy shores of our island, he caught sight of a strange animal, which he thought was a "singa", or lion. He decided to build his city here and named it Singapura, or Lion City. You can find the Merlion statue near the place where Prince Sang Nila Utama first spotted the lion, at the mouth of the Singapore River. There is another Merlion on Sentosa Island.

SUB CENTRE

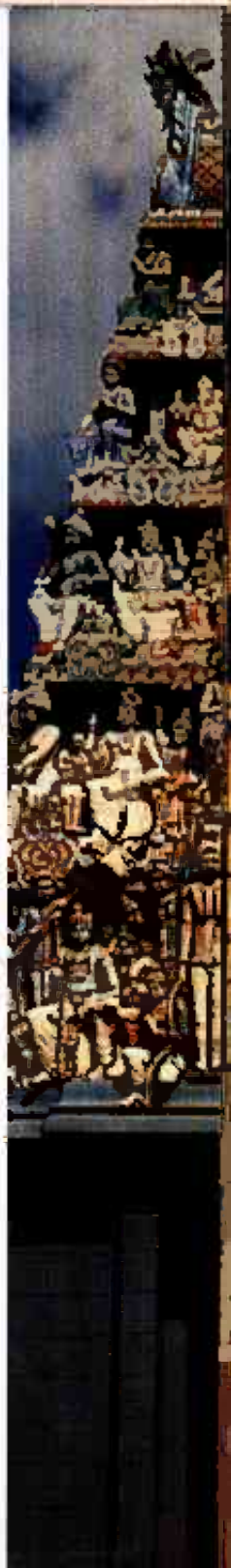
Raffles Place is the financial heart of Singapore. It was known as "Commercial Square" at the beginning of the 19th century. Apart from being the centre of business, it used to be Singapore's main retail and shopping area. The two oldest department stores in Singapore, Robinson's and John Little's, were once located here. They moved to Orchard Road after the Robinson's building burnt down in 1972. When you gaze up at the skyscrapers at Raffles Place today, it is difficult to imagine that many two-to-four-storey buildings used to be built around the square. The square even boasted a landscaped garden with small trees and flowers. The backs of some of the buildings opened to the sea for the loading and unloading of goods. Over the years, these have gradually been replaced with very tall buildings like the OUB Centre, Shell Towers and Clifford Centre.

Clarke Quay was named after Sir Andrew Clarke, Governor of the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang and Malacca) from 1873 to 1875. It used to be an important centre of trading activities. The trading ships in the harbour sent smaller boats to Clarke Quay to load and unload goods like spices, coffee, tea, rice, rubber and tin. On the river banks, many offices and warehouses were built. At that time, Clarke Quay was a hive of activity. Sun-tanned workers with heavy sacks of rice over their shoulders were running over narrow gangplanks. People on shore were yelling and screaming to give the workers directions. Today, you can still see the original brick warehouses that were once used to store goods. Now they are used to house shops, pubs and restaurants. By the river you can eat in a *tongkang*, or Chinese boat, that has been turned into a restaurant.



In the early 19th century, the Chinese were a minority in Singapore. Sir Stamford Raffles divided the settlement into areas for the different ethnic groups to prevent trouble between races. The Chinese were given the area to the south of the river. Within Chinatown lived various groups of Chinese, each with a different dialect, cuisine, and cultural, social and religious background. Many of the immigrants were very poor and starving from hunger. Most Chinese arrived with the hope of making a fortune in Singapore and then return to China. Many of them lived in shophouses. Life was a fight for space and survival. Often, as many as 30 people would live together in a single room. During the Chinese New Year, Chinatown is decorated with colourful lights. Chinese families come here to shop for festive goodies like snacks, clothes, mandarin oranges and decorations.

Right in the middle of Chinatown is Singapore's oldest Hindu temple. The Sri Mariamman Temple was first made of wood and thatch (straw and reeds). Craftsmen from India later rebuilt it in brick. Above the entrance you will see the *gopuram*. This is a tower consisting of hundreds of brightly coloured statues of deities and mythical animals. The temple was built by Naraina Pillay. He came to Singapore with Sir Stamford Raffles and started work as a clerk. Within a short time, he had made a fortune. He decided to build this temple so that Hindus could pray on the way to and from work at the harbour. Many people still come here to pray to the goddess Mariamman who is known for her powers in curing serious illnesses and diseases.



The Thian Hock Kheng Temple used to look over the sea. It was built on the spot where immigrants from China stepped ashore from their dangerous journey across the China Sea. To offer thanks for the safe passage, the Chinese from Fujian Province dedicated the temple to Mazhu, the goddess of the sea. About 100 years ago, men used to carry the goddess' statue around the streets on her birthday. The Thian Hock Kheng Temple, or the Temple of Heavenly Bliss, is one of the oldest Chinese temples in Singapore. Most of the temple's building materials came from China. No nails were used in building the temple. Two stone lions are watching over the entrance. Inside the temple is a statue of the goddess surrounded by burning incense and candles. On either side of her are the deities of health and wealth.

SELAMAT HARI RAYA AIDIL

Sultan Mosque in Kampong Glam is one of Singapore's most important mosques. In 1824, Sultan Hussain Shah proposed to build a mosque here, which was made of brick. It was later torn down, and the present mosque was built in 1924. The mosque's large gold-coloured domes were built on bases made of glass bottles. Inside, the huge prayer hall can accommodate up to 5,000 worshippers. The walls are decorated with green and gold tiles. On the tiles, passages from the Islamic holy book, the Quran, are written in Arabic script. Five times a day, the *muezzin*, or crier, calls Muslims to prayer. On festivals, like Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Muslims will take part in a mass prayer at the mosque. The streets around Sultan Mosque are full of little shops selling fabrics, leather bags, baskets and *songkok haji* (headgear worn by Muslim men who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca).

Read the other book in this series!

The multiracial character of Singapore has given rise to many colourful feasts and festivals. The Chinese light up Chinatown during the Chinese New Year period, the Malays celebrate Hari Raya Aidilfitri in a grand way, and the Indians rejoice during Deepavali and Thaipusam. *Feasts and Festivals of Singapore* will give you a deeper understanding of Singapore's cultures and traditions, so you will fully enjoy the fascinating feasts and festivals celebrated here.

Sights and Scenes of SINGAPORE

Discover the many interesting places Singapore has to offer in *Sights and Scenes of Singapore*. This beautifully illustrated and informative book gives an overview of the many historical sites and places of interest in the island-state. It covers many of Singapore's historical buildings, from the Raffles Hotel, Singapore Art Museum and Victoria Theatre & Concert Hall to the Sri Mariamman Temple, Sultan Mosque and Thian Hock Kheng Temple. The colourful illustrations are accompanied by short descriptions of the places, and interesting facts associated with them. Read *Sights and Scenes of Singapore* and relive the history of these fascinating places in the Lion City.

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